A REFLECTIVE APPROACH TO BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM AND

SCHOOL COMMUNITY FOR STUDENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

by

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DEDICATION

To my fiance, for your love, patients and encouragement through my education and commitment to be a teacher. To my immediate family and friends for giving me the confidence to pursue my goals. Thank you to my Capstone Committee. Your support and guidance truly made my research possible.

"A lot of different flowers make a bouquet."

— *Muslim Origin*

"We need to give each other the space to grow, to be ourselves, to exercise our diversity. We need to give each other space so that we may both give and receive such beautiful things as ideas, openness, dignity, joy, healing, and inclusion."

— *Max de Pree*

"To see the impact of your work, it takes patience."

— *Priscilla Chan*

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Introduction

Teachers make strong contributions to the lives of young people and their community every year by imparting knowledge, humor, and wisdom in their classrooms. I know this is true because I have many great teachers who have left footprints in my life through their efforts. One I will never forget was my high school social studies teacher Mr. Berdnt. What I remember most about him is the way he greeted students and how he carried himself in front of them. In his class, he taught his students to always greet him with the saying, "DoSayBe". Which was his way to remind students and others to do good things, say good words and be a good person. To this day I still remember that slogan because it was so catchy, "DoSayBe". It left a meaningful footprint in me because by following those three simple words, I was reminded that I can choose to be a positive person; show kindness and be inclusive of others.

Parents are also teachers. There are lessons in this world that only a parent can teach and model to a child, things that cannot be taught from school. My mother is one of my greatest teachers. As a single mother of five children, she worked in a medical assembly factory and often had to work overtime. At home, my mother taught me to work hard. She instilled in me the idea that life is not easy—especially for those who do not try to do anything for themselves or are not able to. She often mentions that it is important to work hard for what you want. If you do not work hard, then you will not go

very far in life. Working hard and being responsible are valuable life lessons that I learned from my mother and I hope to pass these values onto my future students.

Although I have many other personal inspirations for wanting to be a teacher—my professional work has also motivated me towards this path. I currently work as a Kindergarten teacher at a charter school. Before that, I served as a special education teaching assistant (TA) in the Saint Paul Public Schools area, serving a range of learners and students with disabilities. My duties included one-to-one and small group teaching sessions with special needs students who have Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The students that I had the most experience working with have Autism Spectrum Disorder. Autism is a developmental disability that is noticeable in children during their first to four years of life. It affects a child's social and communication skills.

The disability of autism students varies from one student to another. Working with autism students has helped me to understand more in depth about some of the challenges that appear only when working with special needs students. As a TA in the autism classroom, I realized there are a lot of challenges in teaching these students. Often times there is not one correct strategy for helping an autism student be successful in school. We might have to deal with things on the fly - and this can cause frustration if one is not used to the environment. Other times, it's trial and error, finding ways to develop a positive relationship with the students and reflecting on different experiences to discover what ideas will work.

In this capstone project, my research question is: *What approach can educators use in public schools to build an inclusive classroom and school community for students*

in special education? I will begin this chapter by sharing my personal experiences on how I got involved in education and teaching. Next, I will share personal stories that have inspired and encouraged me to pursue this particular topic. The stories will unfold practices that I have witnessed first hand in supporting an inclusive classroom and community. Chapter one will end with a summary of my personal experiences in education, followed by an introduction to literature reviews for chapter two.

My Story

I was born in Spokane, Washington. I lived there for nine years before moving to the city of Saint Paul, Minnesota. When I lived in Spokane, I remembered being surrounded by peers who were either Hispanic, White, or African American; there were very few Asians or individuals who looked like me and spoke my native language (Hmong). In school, I was an English Language Learner (ESL) up until I was a junior in high school. At home, I would speak Hmong to my parents and sometimes with English words. When I got to school, I would change gears and speak only English to my teachers and peers. Over time, this process became natural and I knew what I had to do to fit in.

My teachers at that time were primarily Whites. As a student, I would say that I was modest, shy, responsible and respectful. I did everything I was supposed to do as a student and never rebelled against my teachers. Understanding this much about my environment also made me realize that I was socially challenged. I had a difficult time genuinely connecting with people because it felt awkward at times. There were a lot of cultural differences that I experienced with my peers and my teachers that would sometimes make conversing and connecting with people feel strange.

In second grade, I remembered learning to say and write the word "bake". My teacher at that time was teaching a literacy lesson with words that make the long a sound—such as take, make, and lake. It was such a simple word but it was a word that was so foreign to me. The teacher would use this word nonchalantly as if students were supposed to know what it means. I, on the other hand, was sitting on the carpet with poise, pretending to look like I knew what the teacher was talking about. At the same time, I was beginning to feel absolutely lost and excluded from the learning. In my culture, the word bake did not exist, at least not to my knowledge. Being a shy student, I did not have the courage to go up to my teacher to ask what that word meant. Later, I learned the word bake was similar to cooking but doing it over high heat using an oven. In the Hmong language, the word bake is "ci" (as in chee, [ch-ee]) which also means shine and grill. My point about sharing this story is to simply explain that it is very easy to make someone feel excluded from their environment and learning. There can be a variety of disconnections in the classroom that can quickly lead an individual to feel removed from their setting. Knowing this, how can a classroom teacher prepare to ensure that all students feel safe, valued and included?

The Beginning

My experiences working in education began when I was an undergraduate student, working and volunteering as a homework tutor at a private elementary school near campus. After college, I did not have a solid idea as to what I wanted to do. However, tutoring have always felt natural to me and I liked interacting with children. I also felt I was making a genuine difference in someone's life by being present when they

need me. And, I loved seeing the joy and excitement of children making meaningful connections to learning. So, I continued to explore the field of education by working for the Minnesota Reading Corp. as a literacy tutor. I was assigned to tutor at my neighborhood public school. It was approximately six blocks from where I lived at the time. My time as a literacy tutor was important as I was taking an active role to help students get their reading to a place where they can approach reading level text in areas of science, language arts, math, and literacy with more confidence. Following that, I applied and got a job as a special education teaching assistant (TA) in Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS).

The first three years, I worked with high school students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). They all ranged from low level (cannot be independent and must remain in a contained classroom setting) to high level (can be independent and attend the general education classroom with some to no adult support) abilities. Then, I transitioned to work with elementary level students where I supported even more diverse students, ranging from developmental cognitive disability (DCD), learning disability (LD) to emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD). Now, I am a first year Kindergarten teacher. When I first applied for the position as a special education TA, I had no idea what to expect. I did not think much of it at that time and was only open to gaining experiences and to grow. Working as a previous special education TA have truly changed my perspective on being an educator. My experiences working with special needs students truly taught me that even the best teachers need to work twice as hard and have just as much patience and heart to be successful.

Jackie

In my second year as a teaching assistant, I worked with a student named Jackie (not her real name). She had just started her first year in high school. Jackie is autistic and has a unique social personality. She had a routine of saying good morning to people she liked. She also loved giving hugs to people that she admires. Jackie was overall a very likable person among the students who knew her. However, the people who did not know Jackie would quickly shun her because of her unusual behavior. Even teachers who worked with her for the first time had similar reactions.

When I worked with Jackie, her case manager and I were gradually pushing her to be ninety percent in the general education classroom with little to no support from a TA. The times when she was upset were definitely the toughest. She would throw chairs, call adults rude names, leaving and entering other classrooms without permission, announcing her own public suicide, threatening to hurt herself or others. All of these sounds surreal but is indeed factual. Of course, there were reasons why Jackie got upset. Some of those times were from her own feelings of frustration in not being able to understand and complete a class assignment that was simply too difficult for her. And, even though I was in the classroom to support her academically, I noticed the teachers did not always differentiate their assignments to properly accommodate Jackie's academic level. Jackie was not the only student whom I worked with that had similar experiences of being academically challenged in the general education classroom.

According to the Minnesota Department of Health, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder that affects the process of a child's brain that can

impact the way they communicate, behave, learn and interact with others that makes them unique. The cause of ASD is not specifically known but researchers suggest that environmental, genetic and biological influences, could increase the chance of an individual to have ASD (Minnesota Department of Health, n.d.). Children with autism are on the spectrum, which means that one child with ASD will not have the same ability as another who has ASD. The abilities of ASD individuals is wide, ranging from being academically gifted (showing achievements in one or more areas of reading, math, or writing) to severely challenged —may include nonverbal, or an intellectual disability (Minnesota Department of Health, n.d.).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) funds a research program call The Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) Network. In 2016, CDC's ADDM Network most recent studies reported that 1 in 69 children had ASD (based on data retrieved in 2012 from 11 communities). Other key findings from the studies showed that boys were four times more likely to have ASD than girls; children with ASD who were able to take an IQ score, showed having an intellectual disability; approximately 42% of children who identified with ASD were assessed to have qualities of developmental delay by age 3 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018). The studies also report that White children were more likely to be diagnosed and identified as ASD compare to Black or Hispanic children (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018). And, Black children compared to Hispanics, were more likely to be categorized as ASD (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018).

In the general education classroom, it is very likely that teachers will have a student or two who has ASD. Some teachers may or may not have experiences or knowledge working with students with ASD. For this reason, it is even more important that schools provide appropriate training that supports, prepare and equip school staff with appropriate strategies to effectively support the learning diversity of students, including students in special education and English Language Learner (ELL).

Derrick

Derrick (not his real name) is a third grader. He frequently gets upset in class, leading him to yell, kick his chair and talk rudely to others. Sometimes he might destroy his work or run out of the classroom. On a good day, he is calm, smiling and has a positive attitude. He shows the ability to communicate and socialize fairly well with others. Three times a day, Derrick leaves his third grade class to see his special education teacher, Mr. Sam, for 30 to 45 minutes. On the surface, Derrick looks like a normal student. What students don't know about him is that he has a disability.

Derrick is currently identified on his Individualized Education Plan (IEP) as having a developmental cognitive disability (DCD). This means that Derrick has a condition that impacts his intellectual ability which can make his learning in class more challenging compared to his peers. As a result, he may need more adult support and differentiation in class. Derrick has also demonstrated incidents of frustration that leads him to react "aggressively" in the classroom. From my observations working with Derrick, I've noticed that it often stems from his realization of his inability to complete the same work as his peers. As a result, he'll often react negatively. His peers and

teachers are frightened by his actions during these times. They passively shun him as being a "bad" student because he does not do his work and is always acting out. My point is, Derrick is capable of learning and being successful in the general education classroom. At the same time, Derrick needs something else in class to help him feel confident completing task by himself so he is calm and feels successful. What could we as educators have done to improve or change his learning experiences so he would not react negatively?

In the state of Minnesota, about 593,700 people have at least one or more disability; that is approximately 10.9% of the population (Egbert, 2017, p. 2). Men are also more likely than women to have a disability—in which men account for 301,500 and women accounts for 295,200 (Egbert, 2017, p. 2). A person's disability is not always recognized at birth. Sometimes a disability can develop later in life as an individual advances in age. In Minnesota, about 1 in 20 people between the ages of 5-17 years old has a disability; about 1 in 10 people for ages 18-65; and 1 in 3 people for ages 65 years or older (Egbert, 2017, p. 2). The most common disability for children between the ages of 5-17 is a cognitive disability that affects 227,200 people in Minnesota (Egbert, 2017, p. 3).

Reports show that the number of individuals with a disability is growing. The percentage of Minnesotans having a disability increased from 10.0% (2010) to 10.9% (2015) (Egbert, 2017, p. 13). Knowing this, it will be even more important for teachers and school staff to be knowledgeable, have proper training and support to be well equipped to teach students with disabilities of any kind. Schools should offer meaningful

professional developments on learning disabilities and mental illness. This in turn will provide a start for educators to have a better knowledge and resources to support the growing diversity of students.

My Questions

In school, teachers are expected to teach all students from diverse backgrounds and academic capabilities. Being a TA, I had the privilege to work with a lot of teachers (new and veterans) and see variations of how teachers create an inclusive classroom — each one of them having different methods and some very similar. The one thing that I always wonder is: how much time and preparation are teachers taking to create an inclusive classroom that exudes belonging, success, empathy and accountability for all students. Students like Derrick and Jackie are encouraged and pushed to be in the general education classroom with some or no support from a TA. They are expected to function like their general education peers. Knowing this, what models or framework are teachers relying on to create an inclusive classroom. How are teachers supported by their school to ensure that all students' academic and emotional needs are met. Which leads me to my research question: *What approach can educators use in public schools to build an inclusive classroom and school community for students in special education?*

Chapter Summary

I began this chapter with my personal experiences of feeling excluded and disconnected from learning as a child. This all stems from recognizing at an early age that I was different - culturally and academically. Follow my personal stories, I shared my origin of how I got involved in the work of education that led up to my experiences to

work as a special education TA and now a Kindergarten teacher. My work as a TA also allowed me to connect with so many students like Derrick and Jackie. With their stories, it inspired me to pursue my research question: *What approach can educators use in public schools to build an inclusive classroom and school community for students in special education?* In chapter two, I will share literature reviews on the topic of inclusive education. Subtopics that I will discuss include the history of inclusion and special education, benefits and challenges of implementing inclusion, and theories that supports inclusive learning.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

Inclusive education is commonly perceived as a system that exudes "belonging, nurturing, and educating all children and youth, regardless of their differences in culture, gender, language, ability, class, and ethnicity" (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007, p. 351). It is a philosophy that includes all students, no matter their disability or background, access to a free and appropriate public school environment that allows all students meaningful learning experience in the general classroom space (Hossain, 2012). Inclusive education has two features to consider: academic and social/emotional. For the purposes of this paper, academic inclusion is defined as: a student's learning environment; one that is supportive of the student's basic right to core curriculum and interactions with their peers as "part of the life of the classroom"' (Dare & Nowicki, 2018, p. 244). Social inclusion, is defined as a student's opportunity to engage in positive interaction with their peers and participate in activities that endorse acceptance and belonging of all learners in a school or classroom environment (Dare & Nowicki, 2018, pp. 244-245).

When full inclusion is implemented in a school, students with disabilities receive their entire academic learning in the general education setting (Idol, 2006). This is different from mainstreaming: when students with disabilities only spend a certain amount of time in their school day in the general education setting and still receive separate special education services outside of the general education classroom (Idol, 2006). Both inclusion and mainstreaming are ways that inclusive education is practiced to

include students with disabilities in the general education space in the least restrictive environment (LRE; Idol, 2006).

In the United States, there is a growing number of students identified with a disability. Students with disabilities in the general education classroom have increased since 1994, from approximately 46% to 52% (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007). Schools that provide special education program services increased from 8.3 percent to 13.8 percent between the year 1976 to 1977 and 2004 to 2005 (Snyder, Brey & Dillow, 2019). This is likely due to the increased percentage of identified students with specific learning disabilities from 1.8 percent (year 1976-1977) to 5.7 percent (year 2004-2005) (Snyder, Brey & Dillow, 2019). Additional research found in the fall of 2015 showed approximately 95 percent of 6 to 21 year old students with disabilities were served in regular schools (Snyder, Brey & Dillow, 2019). Of these students, 3 percent were served in a separate school; 1 percent were served in private schools, and less than 1 percent were served in a separate residential facility, homebound or in a hospital or a correctional facility (Snyder, Brey & Dillow, 2019). Given the increasing number of students with disabilities in schools, it will be even more important for schools and educators to be ready to provide inclusive practices.

Given this information, I wanted to answer the following question: *What approach can educators use in public schools to build an inclusive classroom and school community for students in special education?* The intent of this literature review is to investigate the role of inclusion in education. To better understand the context of inclusive education, the first section of the chapter will explore the history of inclusion

and special education. The second section will discuss the benefits and challenges of inclusion. Lastly, the third section of this chapter will look at learning theories that support inclusive practices based on the literature review thus far.

History of Inclusion

Education in America has evolved and diversified over the years. Historically, students with a disabilities were separated from the public education because they were seen as incompetent and uneducable (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014). Between the period of 1900 and the 1970s, children with disabilities were isolated from their non-disabled peers (Hossain, 2012). This period was considered the *isolation phase* (Hossain, 2012). In the 1970s, reports showed that over one million children with disabilities were completely separated from public schools and 3.5 million did not receive appropriate services (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014). Students who had severe or profound developmental and cognitive disabilities or physical disabilities did not have the opportunity to attend school (Hossain, 2012).

Judicial Hearings

In order for schools to be more inclusive of students with disabilities, many judicial court hearings were necessary. The movement for inclusive education would never have happened without early court hearings and legislative actions concerning the United States education system. These court hearings involving the education of children with disabilities had many similar challenges to racial segregation. *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), pushed legal laws to grant the concept of 'separate but equal' in regards to race and education (Hyatt & Filler, 2011). This ruling stated that, as long as public schools

provided the same settings to allow all children to receive basic education, states were

legally allowed to separate children of color from attending the same schools as white

children, and consequently exclude children with disabilities (Hyatt & Filler, 2011). The

Brown v. Board of Education (1954) was a significant court case in America that set the

basis for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA ― a federal law that

would later require all schools in America to provide free, appropriate education for all

children with disabilities (Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Gibb, Rausch, Cuadrado & Chung,

2008). *Brown v. Board of Education* made an impact on education because it brought

major attention and debate to the notion that K-12 public schools were *not* 'separate but

equal' (Smith, 2005). Later, this motivated many more court hearings and legislative

actions to push for more and better inclusion of all children, including those with

disabilities.

Rehabilitation Act of 1973

To continue protection and elimination of discrimination against students with

disabilities, a legislative law called the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was created. This law

enforced school districts to provide appropriate services within the school setting for

eligible students with disabilities to meet their individual academic needs (U. S.

Department of Education, 2018). This provided a process for special educational

professionals and parents to recognize learning goals, accommodations, and services

needed to support eligible students to succeed in school (Nepo, 2017, pp. 209-210).

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 further extended protection

and discrimination for individuals with disabilities by giving:

...civil rights protections to individuals with disabilities are like those provided to

individuals on the basis of race, sex, national origin, and religion. It guarantees

equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities in employment, public

accommodations, transportation, state and local government services, and

telecommunications (American Disabilities Act, 2018, para 1).

This legislative effort is important as it enforced civil rights for all children and adults

with a disability, an equal opportunity to fully participate in society that goes beyond the

educational setting. Simply put, legislative laws were necessary as it ensures that

individuals with disabilities, including adults, had the support and resources to get a job,

and partake in civil acts like a person who does not have a disability.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

On November 29, 1975, the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

law, was passed to ensure all children with a disability in the United States, an equal

opportunity and right to further their educational success in the general education

classroom—within the least restrictive environment (LRE) (Murphy, 2016). This law

marked the beginnings of pushing public education systems in America towards an

inclusion of students with disabilities in the classroom. This is important as it governs

how states and public organization provides intervention, special education, and other

related services to eligible children with disabilities in schools.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) is a federal law that was created

to improve educational performance in the United States. NCLB mandates that schools in

the United States be held accountable for the outcome of all students, including those

with a disability (Hossain, 2012). This would give the national government control over

how and which states were performing well academically. Schools in the United States

must also provide specially designed instruction and services to meet the unique needs of

students with special needs in the general education curriculum (Cortiellia, 2006). School

districts in the United States are mandated to assess all students in state common core

areas of reading, math and science from grades three to eight; and, at least one

assessment given in grades ten to twelve, including students with special needs

(Cortiellia, 2006). Although inclusion was not specifically a part of the provisions within

NCLB, it still strongly support and confirms the efforts for schools in the United States to

include all students in general education activities by enforcing schools to improve the

quality and effectiveness of elementary and secondary education to increase the

achievement of all students—particularly among the United State's poor and

disadvantaged students by holding states accountable for the performance of all students

(Hossain, 2012, p. 6)

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is a new law that was signed by President

Barack Obama on December 10, 2015 (Every Student Succeeds Act, n.d). This replaced

the NCLB Act by giving each state a say in how schools meet student achievement by

giving them more say in what academic standards are important (IDEA Series: Every

Student Succeeds Act and Students with Disabilities, 2018, p. 13). This law also gives

more consideration to include students in poverty, minorities, students who receives

special education services, and students with limited English language skills (IDEA Series: Every Student Succeeds Act and Students with Disabilities, 2018, p. 19). Overall, ESSA granted more flexibility and better accountability for how each state's measured student success while holding high expectations for all students. It supports individualized learning and requires parents to be more involved in the educational planning process to support student achievement. This was intended to improve the academic outcome while still holding high expectations, accountability and flexibility.

Special Education

Special Education is a general term that is used to describe a variety of services and specially designed instruction for students with disabilities in the general education classroom at no cost (Bateman & Cline, 2016). The services within special education may include but are not limited to adult support, special instructional learning supplies and materials, and modification to classroom lessons or instruction (Bateman & Cline, 2016).

Special education services supports inclusion by helping educators and parents in three ways: 1) identify specific learning challenges for the students; 2) identify and determine what skills needs extra support; and 3) to clearly state what specific accommodations and modifications are necessary for the individual to be successful in class in their least restrictive environment (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014, p. 19). Special education matters and is part of the United States education system plan for inclusion as well as to provide appropriate assistance to students with disabilities (in the least restrictive environment) so that their school experiences is as inclusive as possible.

The overall goal of special education is to help students with disabilities be as successful in learning the skills they need in the general education space so they can be independent as possible.

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

The least restrictive environment (LRE) is a legal requirement for school districts to offer a spectrum of service models so that special education teams can have the opportunity to review and assess educational contexts for student who receives special education services (McCloskey, 2016, p. 1204). Within the LRE, schools must provide appropriate aides and services to supplement a person with a disability in the general education setting so that their classroom environment can be supportive of their academic needs—it may include special technology equipment to adult support (Murphy, 2016).

Individualized Education Program (IEP)

The Individualized Education Program (or IEP) is a formal document that provides information and guidance to educational professionals regarding instructional and behavioral services necessary to achieve an eligible student's goal in the general education setting in the least restrictive environment (Hossain, 2012, p. 11). The process of developing the IEP document includes the participation of the student's parent or guardian, homeroom teacher, special education teacher, and individuals who provide other services that the student may receive outside of the classroom, to discuss the students' results and progress in the general education (Hossain, 2012, p. 11). The IEP is beneficial in that it provides teachers with immediate information about a student's strengths, weakness and goals (behavior and academic). This can give the teacher a

starting point in how to better design instruction and methods to support students with IEPs in the general education classroom so that it will be a more inclusive environment. In regards to inclusion, this is a procedure that is included within special education services. It is an important process because the IEP outlines the services that the students with a disability will receive (in the least restrictive environment) to participate successfully in the general education classroom.

Summary

The history of education is important as it outlines the major events and laws that paved the way for inclusive education in the United States to consider students with disabilities. The process of achieving a more inclusive education took great measures and time; legislative and federal laws such as IDEA, NCLB and ESSA were created to provide all children equal rights and opportunities for a free, equal, accountable and equitable public education. Today, there is progress in the direction of inclusive education. However, many schools still face challenges and lack consistent resources to effectively support students with special needs in the general education classroom. Additionally, in this section we discussed that special education is another piece of the United States education system which makes it unique and yet confusing for some to understand. Within special education includes IEPs that helps bring together parents, administrators, teachers and students to collaborate on ways to bridge learning and disability in the classroom. When thinking about inclusive education and practices, it is important that schools and educators are ready and appropriately equipped to provide the

best services and education space to students with disabilities as they become adults in society.

Benefits and Challenges of Inclusion

Inclusive education offers benefits and challenges to both the academic and social part of a student's educational experiences. It seeks to bridge the learning needs of all children and adults by paying close attention to those who are likely to be marginalized and excluded (Noggle & Stites, 2018). For schools, inclusion is a positive movement in education that provides all students from any background, a place to learn and to be a part of one learning community (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014, p. 18). It is a philosophy that includes all students, no matter their disability or background, access to a free and appropriate public school environment which allows all students meaningful learning experience in the general classroom space (Hossain, 2012).

Social and Academic Benefits

Inclusive education offers both social and academic benefits for students with disabilities. Academic inclusion is: a student's learning environment; one that is supportive of the student's basic right to core curriculum and interactions with their peers as "part of the life of the classroom"' (Dare & Nowicki, 2018, p. 244). Social inclusion, is a student's opportunity to engage in positive interaction with their peers and participate in activities that endorse acceptance and belonging of all learners in a school or classroom environment (Dare & Nowicki, 2018).

Students with disabilities in the general education classroom can benefit socially by enabling them to practice social engagement with peers who does not have a disability

or receive special education services. Research reports that elementary students with learning disabilities in the general education setting, showed higher reading, writing and math scores compared to students in a self-contained classroom; and this trend continues all the way to middle school (Kirby, 2017). The attendance of students with special needs in the general education classroom have greater attendance than those who are not in the general education classroom (Kirby, 2017). Through inclusive education, special needs students are given more opportunities to choose and experiment with different academic subjects —especially at the high school and middle school level (Kirby, 2017).

Other studies found the academic impact on general education students did not change, instead, stayed the same. A study looked at 50 research case that compared the academic performance of general education students who were segregated from students with disabilities compared to students in general education who were with students with disabilities. Results indicated that general education students performed just as well as students who were in a classroom that did not include a child with severe disabilities (Fisher, Roach & Frey, 2002). Another study found that general education students maintained a positive attitude and were generally more tolerant of others with disabilities when they became more aware of the needs of their peer's disabilities (Fisher, Roach & Frey, 2002). The study also found that students who do not have a disability had more positive feelings about themselves following their experience of being a part of classrooms that included individuals with disabilities (Fisher, Roach & Frey, 2002). The research of inclusion offers many social and academic benefits for the general education students and students with special needs. Inclusive education also seem to prove that it

does no harm to the achievement of non-disabled students, instead, provides opportunities for students to grow their sense of tolerance and understanding of differences (Fisher, Roach & Frey, 2002).

Challenges

With more diversity and learning needs in the schools, there comes many challenges. Including children with disabilities in all parts of education is a global movement. Worldwide, there are more than one billion "persons with disabilities" and 10 percent of these children live mostly in developing countries (Sharma, 2015, p. 317). Children who live with a disability in developing countries are less likely to receive an education due to negative societal attitudes and perception on a person with a disability (Sharma, 2015). Roughly 90 percent of children with disabilities in developing countries do not attend school, while some children are educated in separate facilities (Sharma, 2015). In 2016, 160 countries signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRP). This action was made to emphasize just how import inclusive education is: enhancing the personal well being of a person, investing in their social and academic development, promoting diversity and tolerance is significant in creating a more inclusive world (Noggle & Stites, 2018). However, there remains an inconsistent understanding of what inclusion is and how to successfully approach inclusive practices in the general education setting.

Teacher's Training and Experiences Working with Special Needs Students

One concern of implementing inclusion is the classroom teacher's lack of knowledge and training to properly support specific learning needs. Stair and Moore

(2010) did a study that had 2,610 teachers respond to randomly selected questions

relating to their educational experiences and training to work with students who received

special education services. Of the participants, 58.8 percent of the teachers reported to

have taken at least one course focus on teaching students with special education services;

41.2 percent report to have taken a whole class; and 73.9 percent of the teachers in the

study reported to have completed in-service through their school or another organization

that worked with students with special needs (Stair & Moore, 2010, p. 54). Although the

direction towards inclusion shows positive outcomes for the quality of education and

social life for children with special needs, there remains a gap of teacher inclusion

pedagogy (Dixon & Verenikina, 2007).

Lack of Support Staff

Another challenge with inclusion is the lack of support staff. Schools have had

many challenges in hiring and retaining paraprofessionals who are experienced and

professionally trained (Giangreco, Broer & Edelman, 2002). The lack and loss of

educational support staff also impacts teachers and students' school experiences. For

teachers, the transition can impact the schedules of many school staff and students,

therefore, requiring teachers to alter their routines and put prioritize supports for students

with the greatest needs (Ghere and York-Barr, 2007). For students, the loss of a

paraprofessional staff in a school can leave students to experience difficulties in adjusting

to the change in their school routines (Ghere and York-Barr, 2007).

Teacher's Attitudes on Inclusion

A teacher's attitudes of inclusion can hurt a school from successfully implementing an inclusive school environment. Attitude is defined as, "an individual's viewpoint or disposition toward a particular object —a person, a thing or an idea, etc" (Al-Zyoudi, 2006, p. 56). Past research studies reported that the outcome of an effective inclusive education is dependent on the teacher's positive attitude (Ahmmed, Sharma & Deppeler, 2012). Researchers also found that the length of a teacher's experience in teaching is an important factor in developing a teacher's attitudes towards inclusive education (Ahmmed, Sharma & Deppeler, 2012).

A study found that teachers with less number of years teaching experiences were more positive when compared with teachers with more years of teaching experience (Ahmmed, Sharma & Deppeler, 2012). Another factor that have an important influence in a teacher's attitude toward inclusion is their experience with administrative support. A survey completed by educators indicated that "the degree of administrative support for the practice of inclusion was the most powerful predictor of a general educator's positive feeling toward inclusive practices" (Santoli, Sachs, Romey, & McClurg, 2008, p. 2) Many research showed that positive relationship between administration and educators is an important element in implementing inclusion in the school space as it also impacts their overall perception, experiences, and effectiveness toward inclusive practices (Santoli, Sachs, Romey, & McClurg, 2008). Types of administrative support can include how administration approach in creating a school culture of inclusion, create time for educators and school staff to plan and collaborate, and provide meaningful professional

developments (Santoli, Sachs, Romey, & McClurg, 2008). Overall, a teacher's belief and attitude of inclusive education are important and has an influence on how inclusive practices can be approach in the classroom and school space.

Summary

The literature review on the implications of inclusive education shows that there are positive and negative impacts on the classroom experiences. The move towards inclusive education brings various challenges for schools and educators to meet a wide range of student needs through more inclusive approach. Although there remains some challenges in pursuing an inclusive school environment for all students, it is not impossible.

With the growing diversity in the United States schools, the need for strong inclusive practices is even more important. Many educators enter the field of education with limited experiences and knowledge to approach special education and inclusion. The lack of support staff such as paraprofessionals leaving the field also creates inconsistent resource for schools to be effective in integrating an inclusive classroom environment. Lastly, the attitudes of educators on implementing inclusive practices are not always consistent but is important for the growth of promoting inclusion in schools. The next section will introduce the importance of learning theories and explore learning theories that support inclusive practices.

Learning Theories that Supports Inclusion

Learning theories are valuable in education and can help educators gain deeper insights on the diverse learning styles of students. Knowing different perspectives of

teaching and learning can help educators become more effective in their teaching and

connection with diverse students and communities (Guskey, 2002). There are many

categories of learning theories that influence the understanding of learning and teaching

in education. In the first section, we will explore Vygotsky's theories - Zone of Proximity

and Dynamic Assessment. The second section will look closely at Bruner's Constructivist

theory of learning. The third section will explore Howard Gardner's theory of multiple

intelligences (MI) and how it supports inclusive learning. Finally, the fourth section will

summarize Vygotsky, Bruner and Gardner's learning theories and how it can be helpful

to inform educators in understanding student learning and approaching inclusive

classroom practices.

Lev S. Vygotsky

One theorist that perhaps offers the most complete elements of inclusive practices

is Lev S. Vygotsky. He believed that learning is "a shared–joint process in a responsive

social context" and that "children are capable of far more competent performance when

they have proper assistant (scaffolded learning) from adults" (Gindis, 1999). Vygotsky

believed that a child who identifies as having a disability is not viewed as less developed

compared to their non-disabled peers, instead, they developed differently as a result of

their disability to social and develop naturally (Gindis, 1999).

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is a concept that Vygotsky developed

to explain how cognitive growth develops in children. ZPD suggests that children learn

best when the learning environment is one that offers collaboration with mixed levels of

high and low skilled learners, this in turn will support the learner to internalize new

knowledge (Shabani, Khatib & Ebadi, 2010). To keep the learner in the ZPD state, Vygotsky suggests providing the learner interesting and meaningful learning experiences that offers slightly more challenging tasks that the learner can complete independently but can also work collaboratively with another person (Shabani, Khatib & Ebadi, 2010, p. 238). For example, instruction can be designed to allow group learning activities with children at different levels.

Jerome Bruner

Jerome Bruner was an influential psychologist of the 20th century who developed his own theory and understanding of cognitive growth. He was highly influenced by Lev. Vygotsky's perspective of learning. Bruner's theory suggests that learning is a step by step process in how the mind is used—also referred to as scaffolding (Smith, 2002). He believed that cognitive growth is an interaction that connects human capabilities with the tools and inventions to enhance learning (McLeod, 2008). Bruner believed that the intent of education is to provide an environment that is active, allowing for children to grow and develop their own knowledge (McLeod, 2008). Bruner's scaffolding theory supports inclusive practices because it's a strategy that allows educators to take on a facilitator or supportive role to guide student learning in completing tasks (McLeod, 2008).

Howard Gardner

Howard Gardner is an American Developmental Psychologist who is best known for his theory of multiple intelligences (MI), which he first introduced in his book, *Frames of Mind* in 1983 (Borek, 2003). Gardner's theory suggests that all learners are unique and possess more than one intelligence and ability of learning (Gardner, 1987).

According to Garner, intelligence is defined as, "an ability to solve a problem or to fashion a product that is valued in one or more cultural settings" (Gardner, 1987, p. 25). Within Gardner's theory of multiple intelligence (MI) are eight identified characters of intelligences: linguistic (words and language), logical-mathematical (patterns and numbers), spatial (ideas of images and space), bodily-kinaesthetic (body movement), musical (patterns of sound and rhythm), interpersonal (ability to connect with others), and naturalistic (ability to compare and relate to living things) (Murray & Moore, 2012). Gardners' theory of MI supports inclusive practices by "eliminating the one-size-fits-all approach" (Murray & Moore, 2012, p. 44) When it comes to lesson planning, it is important that educators also design activities that can allow students to experience different ability tasks using Gardner's eight characters of intelligences (Murray & Moore, 2012). This in turn helps educators to be creative and considerate of the various learning styles and abilities a student may have in the classroom (Gardner, 1987). Overall, Gardner's MI theory helps us understand that, in order to create inclusive classrooms, schools and educators need to consider creating curriculum that caters to the student's individual ability while building on their academic and social needs (Murray & Moore, 2012).

Summary

Learning is ongoing. Theories of learning provide educators a guide and understanding to approach instruction. The theories that Gardner, Bruner and Vygotsky have created are suggestions that educators can do to guide and develop their practices towards inclusion in the general education class; that is also the least restrictive

environment for students who receive special education services. Most importantly, theories should inform and help educators reflect on their current practices and teaching philosophies; encourage possible changes and plans in their teaching so that they can provide the best learning environment for students (Pritchard, 2017).

As quoted in Ambrose (2010), Simmon said, "Learning results from what the student does and thinks and only from what the student does and thinks. The teacher can advance learning only by influencing what the student does to learn" (p. 1). There are many pedagogy techniques and styles in the realm of education. When it comes to inclusive learning and teaching, it is important for educators to consider methods and strategies that support different learning needs and offers multiple experiences of learning. Inclusive teaching does not necessarily have to be complicated nor does it require the teacher to change their entire teaching instruction (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro & Lovett, 2010). However, inclusion does mean that educators need to be flexible and be willing to make small changes within their current practices to move towards an inclusive approach that welcomes a variety of learners (Murray & Moore, 2012).

Chapter Summary

The intent of chapter two is to explore key topics and research that provides an understanding about the process of inclusive education. The chapter began by investigating the history and pattern of inclusion of children with disabilities in the United States public schools. In the early 20th century, children with disabilities were excluded from public education. In order to draw attention and importance for the

inclusion of all students to have equal access to a free and public education, significant

legislative actions were necessary. Next, we explored different aspects of special

education and the services that comes with those who qualify for it. The impact of

inclusive education also opened doors to many benefits and challenges. Lastly, we

explored Gardner, Brunner and Vygotsky's theories of learning to understand the

different perspectives and approach to learning and teaching. Chapter three will describe

in detail the project that I propose, as a response to this question: *What approach can*

educators use in public schools to build an inclusive classroom and school community for

students in special education?

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction

Nelson Mandela once said, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world" (Nelson Mandela Education, n. d.). I believe in this and I also believe that in order to achieve significant changes, in relation to education, we must be hungry to learn and to be innovative. Teachers must see change through themselves; be reflective, honest and vulnerable. The intent of this capstone project is to answer the research question: *What approach can educators use in public schools to build an inclusive classroom and school community for students in special education?* In chapter three, I will include a description of my capstone project, the framework and principles used to guide this workshop, assessments, settings, audience, and a summary of chapter three, followed by a brief introduction to chapter four.

Project Description

The goal of my project is to provide a reflective workshop training to help educators reflect and review their current approach to teaching and learning in an inclusive school system. The content of the workshop will be presented in the form of a Google Slide presentation, which will allow me to share the slides with my audience and use other other technical tools like text, images and videos to enhance my presentation. The duration of this workshop will run for one hour in a half to two hours. Participants will be provided with a paper print copy of the Google Slides as well as links to access them online.

This workshop is an introduction to special education and inclusion. I will highlight the important information of special education and inclusion, using transformative learning as the principle for the workshop, followed by reflective discussion and on-going assignments. This workshop will focus on helping individuals reflect on their current teaching approach by using self video recording(s) (from an iPad, mobile phone or camera) to aide in assessing their current practices towards inclusive learning environment for their students. The self-reflection questionnaire will support participants to critically examine and reflect on their video, follow-up with group sharing and reflection on the progress of their plans toward an inclusive classroom. In this training, participants have opportunities to share and exchange ideas with each other regarding their use of tools, strategies, any challenges they experienced, and any changes they made to their plans from the first presentation. Near the end of the school year, an evaluation of the entire workshop will be emailed out to all participants to share and evaluate the process of participants experiences and looking ahead to the next school year.

Framework

This first part of this project will consist of a presentation, highlighting information about special education and inclusion and transformative learning theory as the principles for approaching this workshop. Next, participants will engage in small group discussion activity using example scenarios to get participants to discuss on various solutions, approach and challenges to the scenarios. Finally, participants will complete a self reflective questionnaire sheet to get participants thinking about their

current strengths and weaknesses, areas that need improvement, actions they may need to take to improve those areas and identify one or two goals for the school year.

Participants will be given three self-reflective questionnaires. These questionnaires will occur on different dates throughout the school year during professional learning community (PLC). One self-reflection will occur in the beginning of the school year (late August), one in the middle (sometime in January) and the last one near the end of the school year (sometime in May). The goal of the self-reflective questions in this workshop training is to document the participants experience and their thought process.

In order for individuals to have a greater self-reflection experience, participants will video record themselves teaching or working with students. Participants must complete two video recordings. One will occur sometime in January, before completing the January self-reflection questionnaire. The second will occur sometime in May, before completing the self-reflection questionnaire for that month.

Transformative Learning Theory

My final project is based on Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory. Transformative Learning Theory is a constructivism learning theory on adult learning that was developed by Jack Mezirow (Howie & Bagnall, 2013). It explains that individuals make meaning of their life experiences through their values, opinions, awareness and understanding of their own bias, perception and assumptions of the world, which Mezirow calls it one's *frame of reference* (Mezirow & Associates, 2000). Mezirow defines transformative learning as:

"the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. Transformative learning involves participation in constructive discourse to use the experience of others to assess reasons justifying these assumptions, and making an action decision based on the resulting insight." (Mezirow & Associates, 2000, p. 7-8)

Mezirow believes learning can occur in four ways: 1) by elaborating one's current beliefs and worldviews —or frame of reference , 2) by learning new beliefs and worldviews, 3) by transforming one's point of view, or 4) by transforming one's habits of mind (Mezirow & Associates, 2000), p. 19). *Point of view,* is a particular experience that directly shapes how a person automatically judge or behaves, which leads them to determine what and how experiences have a cause and effect relationship (Mezirow & Associates, 2000). *Habits of mind*, is described by Mezirow as an individual's basic tendency to approach positively or negatively towards the unknown, that later develops into one's point of view (Mezirow & Associates, 2000).

The process of transforming one's learning begins with the individual's experiences with a *disorienting dilemma* and processing it cognitively through making a critical reflection. Disorienting dilemmas are a person's experiences that no longer match a person's current perception of the world (Howie & Bagnall, 2013). Critical reflection is a significant step in the theory as it is the process of individuals purposely reflecting on a

particular experience to develop new meanings and to make sense of their current beliefs (Howie & Bagnall, 2013). There are three types of critical reflection: content reflection, process reflection and premise reflection (Mezirow & Associates, 2000). Content reflection is when individuals simply think and reflect on the new experiences. Process reflection, is when the individual determines what they will do to the new experiences, which may include using problem solving strategies to determine the purpose of that experience. Premise reflection is when individuals compare and contrast the new experiences to their current beliefs, values and opinions. This may lead them to debates, producing questions that challenges or validates their current assumptions and beliefs through the process of reflective discourse —which is carried out in the form of a mindful peer dialogue and discussion (Howie & Bagnall, 2013). After critical reflection, transformative learning theory requires individuals to take action on the person's newly gained insight and reflective views —this can occur right away or through a gradual process of planning and reasoning (Mezirow & Associates, 2000). In doing this, Mezirow says the individual can overcome "situational, emotional, and informational constraints that may require new learning experiences in order to move forward" (Mezirow & Associates, 2000, p. 24)

Assessments

There will be two evaluation forms given—one at the beginning of the school year and one near the end of the school year. At the end of the presentation, participants will be prompted to complete an anonymous feedback sheet with short questions and responses regarding the training. A google form link to the questions is also made

available to access online for participants who did not get the paper form. This feedback is intended to provide an overall evaluation of the training, takeaways, suggestions for future training, and improvements.

Participants and Setting

The participants of this project will come primarily from an elementary school in the Saint Paul Public School district area that received Title I funds for school year 2018 (Minnesota Report Card, 2018). The school that I collaborated with has 508 students enrolled for the school year and student demographic of 49% Asian, 27% Black, 10% White, 7% Two or More Races, 7% Hispanic or Latino, and 1% American Indian or Alaska Native. Out of 493 students, 272 students are English Learner (55.2%), 87 receives Special Education (17.6%), 379 receives Free or Reduced Priced Lunch (76.9%), and 8 are Homeless (1.6%) (Minnesota Report Card, 2018). The school has 36 teachers, 20 paraprofessionals, 2 administrators, and 13 other staff - including non-licensed staff. Seventy-six percent of the teachers have a Master's Degree, 21% with Bachelor's Degree and 2% has a Doctorate (Minnesota Report Card, 2018). Of these teachers, 86% of them have more than 10 years of teaching experience, 14% with 3 to 10 years of teaching experiences and 0% of less than 3 years (Minnesota Report Card, 2018).

Audience

The primary audience for this project is written for licensed teachers and non-licensure staff (such as school behavior specialist and paraprofessionals) who works directly with students. In schools, teachers, paraprofessionals and behavior specialists are

one of the key professionals that have the greatest influence in supporting the direction and success of students' learning. Throughout the school day teachers, paraprofessionals, and behavior specialist are limited to time to reflect and discuss on personal success and challenges working with students. This project offers opportunities for both license teachers and non-license school staff to deeply reflect and work together to improve their practices.

Chapter Summary

In conclusion, the purpose of my project is to provide opportunities for educators to reflect on their current approach and teaching methods that supports inclusion. A presentation, along with small group activities and reflective assignments spread out through the school year was created to document participants journey. The workshop training is focused on enhancing educational staff's (includes paraprofessional and any educational professionals that work directly with students or in a school environment) experience in evaluating their current approach to teaching; use video recording and self-reflection questionnaire to identify professional strengths, weaknesses and goals towards a more inclusive classroom and school environment. Chapter four will begin with an overview of my project; share new learnings that I gained while developing and completing my project; revisit literature reviews that supported my project; address implications of the capstone project, the benefits, limitations, how the results of the research will be used and possible future studies.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

Introduction

Through my previous experiences as a special education paraprofessional and tutor, I was able to see the realities of implementing inclusion with special education in today's public school classroom. Educators are given great responsibility to teach diverse learners, with many who have had little to no experience or training in special education. A loss in classroom support (such as paraprofessionals) is a challenge to replace and can lead teachers to prioritize support for students with greater needs. In addition, teacher's beliefs and attitudes towards inclusion can impact their ability to effectively teach diverse learners in the classroom.

This motivated me to explore many literature reviews to try and help answer the question, *What approach can educators use in public schools to build an inclusive classroom and school community for students in special education?* In this chapter, I reflect on my overall learning, highlighting the learnings I have gained throughout this research process and literature reviews that I found most helpful and influential in the development of my project. In addition, the implications this project may have on schools and the benefits that my project could provide. I also wanted to reflect on the limitations of the project that may serve as a challenge and the results obtained from this project and how it will be used. Finally, I also wanted to reflect on future research that could be worth exploring.

New Insights Gained

In the process of writing my capstone paper, I have learned many things about myself as a writer, researcher, and a learner. As a writer, I learned the value of being patient and persistent in the process of writing. When I was drafting out the first few chapters, I had many doubts regarding my ability to write on such a topic at this scale, it was something I didn't have much experience with before and didn't really know what to expect. However, throughout this process, I feel that I was able to remain strong due to the support and feedback from my peers, teachers, mentors, and family. Whenever I had doubts about my writing, I was able to ask them for support and that would motivate me to continue forward.

As a researcher, I learned the skill to organize well. I personally found this writing process to be quite overwhelming at times as there were many topics to cover, especially when writing the literature review. However, I was able to gather much support and guidance by reading many articles of scholarly research, referring to the capstone workbook, reading other peoples' research work through Digital Commons at Hamline University, and speaking with my content expert and professor to ease the process.

As a learner, I am excited to be able to say that I can and have written an academic paper. I also learned that it's okay to take things one step at a time. Some days while writing this paper, I found myself spending a lot of hours reading and writing without any breaks because I was driven to do as much as I could. As I am nearing the completion of this paper, I am proud of the skills that I have gained. I will always remember this experience as one that moved me forward emotionally and academically.

But most importantly, writing this paper will be one of my greatest accomplishments as a graduate student.

Revisit Literature Reviews

The literature review was a very helpful step in the process of writing this paper as it provided me with the information necessary to help put together my final project. *An Overview of Inclusive Education in the United States* (Hossain, 2012), was one review that I found influential as it covered the history and major laws of inclusive education with consideration of special education. Hossain (2012) described students with disabilities between the period of 1900 and the 1970's was a time of *isolation phase*, in which they were separated from the general education classroom. It discussed how children who were considered to have moderate to severe disabilities were denied access to free public education. This later changed throughout the twentieth century when educators, parents and activists pushed legislation to create federal laws—such as the IDEA Act—to protect the civil rights of children with disabilities in public schools, also known as the *integration phase* (Hossain, 2012).

The second set of reviews that I found helpful covered topics relating to the benefits and challenges of inclusion (Kirby, 2017; Fisher, Roach & Frey, 2002; Stair & Moore, 2010; Ghere and York-Barr, 2007; Ahmmed, Sharma & Deppeler, 2012). These resources helped me understand the implementation of inclusive education can be advantageous while pointing out areas that need more attention, such as professional development and teacher training.

Lastly, Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow & Associates, 2000; Cranton & King, 2003) were highly influential resources that helped the development and organization of my capstone project. It provided me more understanding of the adult learning process and provided me with strategies to approach my workshop training so that it would be suitable for adults.

While I was doing my literature review I also gained a new understanding of planning and designing activities to go along with the workshop presentation topics. Because my project is designed to create opportunities for educators to be reflective of their instructional practices in the course of a school year, it was vital to develop activities and tasks that were practical for participants to engage in. This was also an area that I found quite challenging to execute as I became more aware that I was creating content for adults instead of children (which I was not used to doing). In order to complete this part of the project, I had to use my knowledge and understanding of adult learning to create activities that were relevant to my audience and that would also help improve their instructional practices in the school and classroom space.

Implications

This capstone project is a reflective workshop training that was completed in July 2019. If approved, I hope to implement this project in September 2019 during the opening week when school staffs return to prepare for the new school year. This project will be a starting point to practice reflective discourse and self-reflection. My hope is to foster a culture of professional self-reflection and discourse using Mezirow's principles of Transformative Learning Theory as a base to approaching inclusive practices with

special education students in mind. Implications that my project can have at the district level can include using the materials from this project as an alternative method to observe and keep records of staff performance. This can offer choice and flexibility for school leaders and school districts to foster collaboration while still have time to make professional observations, provide meaningful evaluation and provide feedback.

Benefits

My project focuses on creating an ongoing, reflective process for supporting educators to improve their current teaching methods with the use of video recording, self-reflective questionnaire and small group professional discourse. Through the materials in my project, educators can gain a more meaningful professional learning experience to improve and grow in their current practices. Schools can benefit from this project by having access to free, already made materials to immediately start offering reflective professional training.

Limitations

One limitation to this project was time and competition. Teachers are required each year to complete a number of specific professional development topics. Due to the limited topics, it will be competitive to get educators and school staff to enroll in my specific workshop training. The second limitation is commitment. This workshop was developed to have ongoing reflective assignments that includes the process of video recording and reflective discourse in professional learning communities. This is to provide the most meaningful professional learning experiences outcome.

However, the task of video recording and completing the self reflection questionnaire might be an area that my targeted audience may not feel the most comfortable doing for the following reasons: 1) participants may have little to no experience in operating technology devices that enables video recording; 2) participants may not feel comfortable reviewing videos of themselves teach or work with students; 3) participants may simply do not want to complete the task as it may take up extra time away from their other work and responsibilities.

The task of video recording itself also could be an area that many schools, educators and parents will have some concerns regarding privacy and the process of implementing in real time during interactions with students. One aspect to keep in mind is that the workshop I have created while writing this paper is currently not offered in the school I work at.

Results

The workshop training consists of two workshop evaluation surveys—via online and paper copy. The first evaluation will be distributed at the end of the workshop presentation. The second workshop evaluation will be distributed near the end of the school year—tentatively around the month of May or June. After each evaluation has been completed, the results will be emailed to all staff to review. The response collected from these two evaluations will also be used to improve the content and areas of focus in the workshop presentation; provide better resources and tools to support educators improve their practices and approach in teaching.

Future Research

In the future, it would be interesting and beneficial to do additional research on how school leaders (e.g. principals and assistant principals) can foster a school wide environment to support instructional collaboration between teachers, special education teachers, social workers, and paraprofessionals in public schools. Another possible future research topic is to learn more about how and in what ways can school district invest in the careers of school paraprofessionals so they are more included as an educator in the classroom. Topics that can be covered can include the history of paraprofessionals, how the responsibilities and expectations of a school paraprofessional have changed over time, what are the school and experience requirements for the role, current barriers and challenges in retaining and investing in the careers of paraprofessionals in today's public school system.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research collected in this paper and the reflective workshop training that was developed, was to answer my research question of, *What approach can educators use in public schools to build an inclusive classroom and school community for students in special education?* My personal and professional experiences as a student and as an educator, equally inspired and motivated me to pursue this topic. The process of writing the literature review and creating the reflective workshop project was one that I found to be the most challenging, but it has taught me to grow and improve as a learner, writer and researcher.

Educators today have the power to influence learning, nurture the minds of children and make learning as enjoyable and as inviting as possible. At the same time, we

can't do it alone and we will likely not do it perfectly. However, we can still try to our utmost ability. For that reason, my hope in pursuing this research and for creating my reflective workshop training is to simply create opportunities in the workplace to make gradual change ourselves first and grow from it

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